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# The Workshop

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## ON CHAMBER DECORATION.

By Dr. BADER.

The most accepted method of adorning the walls of our dwelling houses is to cover them with paper hangings. A glance at the patterns of a by no means unimportant paper manufactory has induced me to write the following lines, added to the conviction I have long entertained that an improvement in this field of Art is very desirable.

It is indeed melancholy to think what utter absence of all good taste is to be seen in this article of manufacture; not indeed in the high priced patterns, which in many instances display a lively sense of form and color, and are frequently distinguished by a noble conventionality, but in the inferior and cheaper kinds, which are especially intended for the middle classes of society, whose interests ought to be particularly cared for in this respect. It is difficult to say, whether in these ungraceful paper hangings, the boundary line between the beautiful and the ugly is not just reached, or whether a decided step has not been made beyond it into the realm of the absolutely disgraceful. What beauty can sensitive eyes perceive in those endless and confused ramifications of flowers and arabesques, without a single point of repose, but where all seems to be sailing about in an eternal flood? Scarcely better are those patterns in which some conventional leaf or scroll, or some similar flourish is repeated again and again without any variety, till every corner of the wall is covered with this monotonous figure.

And where are the colors? The most agreeable and most highly prized motives for our paperhangings are flowers. We will make a concession to the naturalism which reigns in this department, and allow that flowers

in their natural colors rising out of a suitable ground form a pleasant ornament for any room, and in this kind we possess many charming patterns. These however are generally of too expensive a character for ordinary dwelling houses, and so a cheap substitute is attempted, and flowers and leaves are printed in one color, blue or brown or red, or any color whatever, on an intolerable gray ground. Somewhat better are those papers, whose patterns are a combination of geometrical figures, either by themselves or in union with arabesques and plant motives, because in these the sentiment of color is not so manifestly offended, although a comparison with the arabesques and other models to which they owe their origin, shows that it is entirely the coloring which imparts to them their life and spirit.

One color can only produce its effect by juxtaposition with some other. A glance at nature shows us all colors united in one field. Every one who steps beyond his door, is delighted at the variegated play of color he beholds before him; never can the eye turn away from it with fatigue. Should we deprive ourselves of this enjoyment in our houses, and turning away from the smiling face of nature weary our eyes by the aspect of the eternal gray of our walls? Surely there must be some means, by which our eyes may be made to rest upon our walls with the same sense of enjoyment with which they ever rest upon the landscape and the garden. All that we need for this is the employment of some little energy. Hitherto we have not ventured boldly to place two distinct colors close to one another, or by means of a well defined frame, to raise an ornament effectually from its ground. Where we wish to obtain

such an effect, we rather adhere to the eternal monotony of the gold mouldings. And yet a bold blue stripe round a red or brown wall, or a yellow fret border as the frame work of a green surface has a better and more agreeable effect than all the gold mouldings in the world. We may learn this from the ornamental and elegantly decorated walls of the houses of Pompeii, on which gilding is scarcely even seen, but on which color is displayed in the greatest luxuriance.

Here too another defect in our modern method of decoration strikes us. The intensive colors are with few exceptions entirely banished from our rooms. Instead of a bright red, or a full bodied green, we clothe our walls with all possible, and even impossible shades of gray, here and there indeed exchanged for a pale blue, or dull red, or passing over into a dirty yellow tint. Whether or not this gray ground, which is now so much an object of favor, be relieved by some ornament or pattern of a lighter or darker gray is a matter of perfect indifference, the effect always remains dull and insipid. It is quite the fashion only so to distinguish the ornament from the ground that when the former is executed in bright colors, the latter should be dull. It is frequently quite impossible to distinguish the ornament, when so executed, from the ground, unless by some happy accident a favorable reflexion of the light falling on the wall comes to the assistance of the eye. What then can be the use of an ornament which can scarcely be distinguished without close observation? And so if we add a brown or blue border or a few mouldings above or round a wall decorated in this manner, we think that we have done enough in the way of ornamentation, and that our boasted sense of the beautiful has produced something possessing some pretension to perfect elegance.

To the same category belong the white paper hangings with similar patterns to those on the gray, or altogether destitute of ornament. But here there is another matter of importance to be considered. We desire very properly that our rooms should produce a feeling of comfort and sociability. The whole arrangement should at once announce the place to be a pleasant one to inhabit, an impression by no means to be gained from a white wall, which on the contrary involuntarily excites a feeling of bareness and discomfort. Such imitations of the smooth cold marble may be suitable for spacious halls, the walls of which are relieved by columns and pilasters, but not for the sitting room, whose destination and limited space forbid any such relief.

To this must be added a second requirement; that color should again occupy its old and rightful place. We should use every effort to re-awaken among us that lively sense of color, which is indigenous to every people and was by no means deficient in our ancestors. We have banished Polychromy from the exterior of our houses, which we clothe in one monotonous stone color from basement to attic, let us then take care that our rooms do not reflect the tedious monotony of the outside.

When these two principles are well established, with

regard to the decoration of rooms, that due attention be paid first to the beauty of form in the ornamentation, and secondly to its most effective coloring, another question arises as to the space which the ornament should occupy, whether the whole or only some parts of the wall should be filled with it.

This question may be answered in the simplest manner from the very nature of the decorative art, whose task it is to bring out the several parts of any given object according to the relative importance of each, and so adorn each in a manner corresponding to its nature. It is of very little use, to clothe the wall with paper of lively colors, or to paint on it ornaments of all kinds, without any regular plan; the first task of the decorator is far more to arrange and plan his design according to the given space, the proper ornamentation will then soon be found. The wall of the room divides itself at once into three horizontal stripes, the basement on which it rests, the frieze which allows a transition with the ceiling, and between these, the wall surface itself. Whether any vertical division is also necessary, depends entirely on the size of the room; in small or moderately large ones we may altogether leave it out of sight, because the walls have then no such massive effect as to render necessary a separation between the supporting and the merely enclosing parts, while in the case of larger wall surfaces a vertical division is absolutely indispensable to produce a good general effect.

Let us examine the several parts more closely. The basement is in our day generally treated in a very step motherly fashion. In many cases it is frequently altogether absent, and usually when there is any it is so low that it is scarcely worth notice. There is certainly one good reason for this, that through the great quantity of furniture that now fills up our rooms it is scarcely visible. Where, however, it is otherwise, where here and there it comes into view, it should not be neglected. It should have either a dark tint with but little ornament, for which the Pompeian wall paintings display such beautiful models, or be executed in stone color, divided into courses by painted fillets or by simple lines, perhaps relieved by borders or stripes of a darker color, and these again adorned with arabesques, animals etc. The most appropriate height for the basement is that of the window-sill which generally corresponds with the height of the tables and chairs. Especial attention should then be paid to the space under the window, which always remains in view, and seems, by its very decided form to invite a greater display of color. Here may be recommended motives of genre, lightly sketched on a dark ground, or fantastic arabesques with sphinxes and dragons in the manner of the Sgraffito painting, for which both the Antique and Renaissance offer a rich abundance of models.

If in the basement we recommend rather the dark and undecided tints, we think the frieze, on the contrary to be the field for the most brilliant colors. Whatever of the bright and brilliant decoration has at its command may here be displayed. I do not propose any relief orna-

ment for the decoration of the frieze, nor any series of well executed paintings; as I am treating only of ordinary dwelling houses, where only what is reasonable in price can be attained, and where we must seize upon the simplest, but at the same time the most effective means, viz., arabesques executed by means of pattern-papers. A rich choice of these may be seen in Antique and Renaissance reliefs and paintings, of which there are abundant specimens published in the "*Workshop*". Where the means are at hand, we would not content ourselves, as before, with only giving two colors to the patterns of the frieze, one to the ornaments and another to the ground; we would employ every beauty of color in these arabesques, and enliven them with figures of animals, cupids, sporting children, ecc. Coats of arms, allusions to the functions and position of the inhabitants, to particular experiences, to distinguished actions of some members of the family etc., may here very suitably find their place. In this way, the frieze, which runs round the entire wall, and is everywhere equally visible, would form a striking ingredient in the ornamentation of the room, and without being an actual work of Art, which indeed only a few of the Pompeian paintings are, it will delight every visitor by its noble conventionalism and rich coloring. It would be of little use to give any rule about the breadth of the frieze. This must depend on the height of the room, for it would be as foolish to furnish a low ceiling with a broad frieze, as to place, according to modern custom, a border of the breadth of an inch in a lofty room. The proper proportion will in all cases easily be found; let it however always be remembered that the frieze should never be interrupted by cupboards, pictures or statues.

Immediately above the frieze is the cornice executed in stucco or plaster, or else replaced by appropriately moulded woodwork, or lastly, where economy is an object expressed by painting. It is a proof of the little understanding with which our painters usually undertake decoration that this part is so frequently neglected and often entirely suppressed. For in truth it has the most just pretension to careful treatment. The frieze is essentially decorative, the cornice on the contrary is an absolute necessity in the entirety of a building. For it is the cornice which, by its projection from the surface of the wall to which it adapts itself, forms the connecting element between the wall and ceiling. Grecian Art, which even applied color to the exterior of its temples, never overlooked the cornice. Honeysuckle ornament in combination with the egg and dart mouldings and beadrolls, became here, and with good reason, the stereotyped patterns.

The basement and frieze should, as a matter of course, never be carried to such an extent of breadth that the wall surface between them should become a mere stripe; the latter on the contrary should even remain the principal object, as it is the most appropriate for the reception of ornamentation. The painter however has here the least important business, for the chief ornaments of our walls are framed pictures and photographs, for

which space must be left. But here is now the place for the taste of the decorator. I have given my reasons above, why I am withheld from approving our modern papers. If in this branch of Art-Industry there has been of late some little improvement, we are still at a great distance from the radical change which is necessary. Excellent models are close at hand. Whoever is acquainted with the rich colors of the oriental carpets, or the beautiful tapestry which Romanesque Art produced, cannot but be well aware of the path which ought to be entered upon; but till this is the case we must content ourselves with covering our wall surfaces with but one color. All colors may be considered of equal value, only we would forbid altogether the disagreeable gray. A wall with such a simple color offers this advantage, that pictures and statuettes stand out in better relief from a monotonous background than from one with some pattern running through it. In respect of greater cheapness also, preference must be accorded to simplicity of the wall decoration. The basement and frieze, executed according to the ideas enunciated above, will be more expensive than a wall covered entirely with paper hangings, but the expense may be equalised in some way by the more simple treatment of the wall itself.

One word more upon the vertical division of the wall, which must at the same time fulfil two functions, those of enclosing space and supporting the heavier parts. If the wall decoration is judiciously designed it must bring these two functions separately into evidence. Now if it is from good reasons that we abstain from ornamenting the walls of our sitting rooms with columns or pilasters, we must also banish all representations of them, for there is always this difficulty with architectural paintings, that while they may present a correct appearance to the spectator, viewed from one standpoint, from every other they will appear distorted. We shall better attain a suitable covering for the wall, by adopting the simplest method, namely dividing the surface which is left between the basement and frieze into small panels separated from one another by broad vertical borders, which will convey to the eye the idea of pillars. In their coloring they should show a distinct treatment from the wall and may be susceptible of much decoration, deriving their ornaments from the painted pillars of Greece, or from a happy imitation of that Renaissance style of which there have been so many specimens given in the "*Workshop*". These ornaments should always for cheapness be executed in surface painting. In rooms of smaller extent it will be enough to apply such borders as these to the corners.

The panels into which the wall is thus divided offer the most opportune surfaces for pictures, statuettes etc. As they are not of too great an extent, they will allow the formation of small groups by which the owner's little treasures in the way of pictures etc. can be arranged according to their subjects, for nothing will produce a more unpleasant impression than the combination of landscapes, portraits and genre pictures in the same group.

There is a second point to be considered in the arrangement of these panels. All want of harmony between them and the furniture must carefully be avoided. If for example the sofa is to be placed in the middle of the side wall of the room, we must not then divide the wall into three panels, but leaving the side-panels out of consideration, must make the centre one of such dimensions that the sofa may stand easily between the borders which inclose it. The central panel then has a distinct character, on account of its greater extent, as the principal part of the wall, and has therefore pretensions to a richer adornment than the others. But above all we must take care that the pictures are not hung so as to run over the border line from one panel into another for then the whole decoration would become absurd. If again a picture of some large dimension is to be displayed, the decoration should be arranged with reference to its size. Thus it becomes very necessary that the proprietor and the decorator should come to an understanding before the execution of the work, and take care above all things that the number and arrangement of the furniture and pictures should be determined on and chosen in due harmony with the style of the decoration.

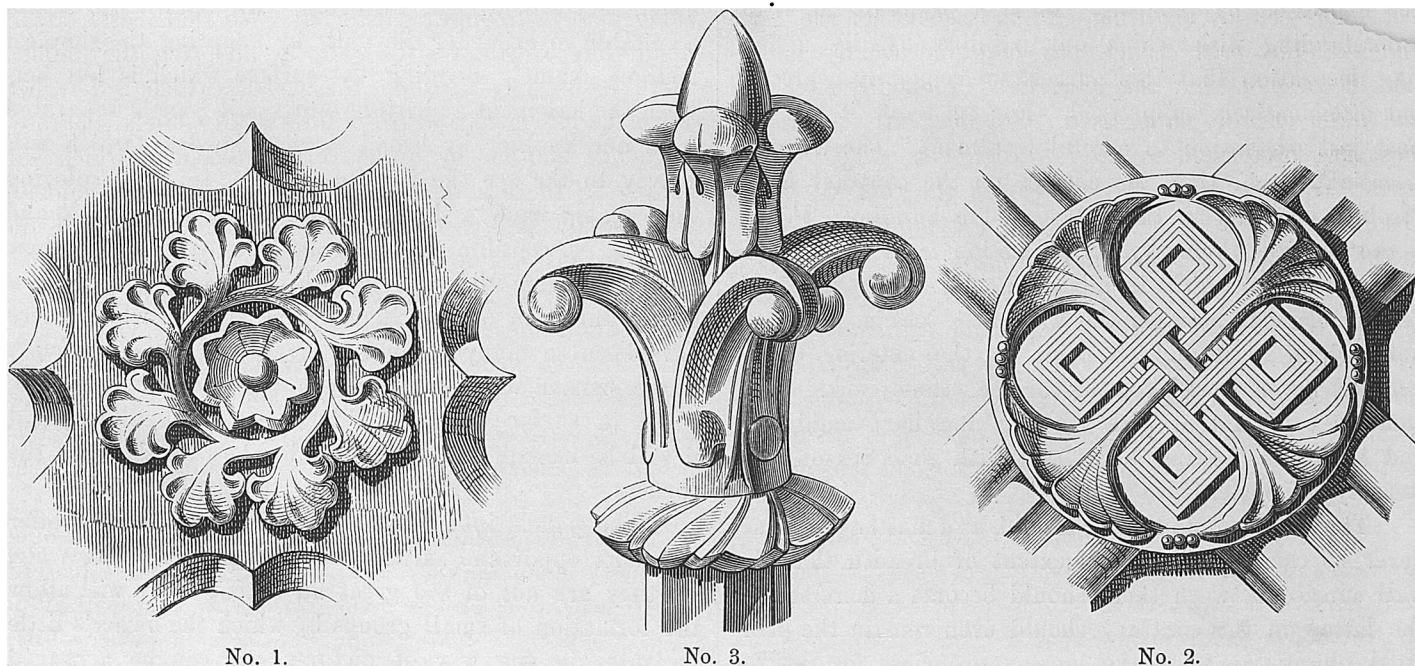
Lastly, with well decorated walls the ceiling should also be carefully treated. Economy of ornament is no where to be so much deprecated as here; a smooth, white ceiling destitute of all ornament has a most heavy and oppressive effect. The object of the decoration must here be to take away the idea of weight from the eye,

and the simplest means of obtaining this end is to lay the timbers free as the supporting members, so that the ceiling proper appears as a simple panelling. Instead of beams running parallel or ribs crossing each other, rich ceilings may also be constructed, which, with their moulded wood work and highly ornamented ground, cover the room like an ornamental tent.

Where there is no possibility of having the supporting beams free, we would treat the ceiling in the same manner as the walls, and use only painted borders. If these are executed without any shading or any direct imitation of plastic relief they will still be as independent members to the eye, and appear to stand out from the surface, and the ceiling will in this manner be very easily lightened and adorned. For the decoration of panels in the ceiling we would recommend that they should be treated, for simplicity's sake, in the manner of the Roman coffered ceiling with borders and flowers; but other styles may judiciously be employed according to the fancy of the painter which may here allow itself the freest scope.

If the walls are not divided vertically, the treatment of the ceiling may be quite independent of them; but if they are divided into panels, it is an absolute necessity that the beams which support the roof, or whatever replaces them, should rest exactly on one of the wall pilasters, in order that the decoration may at the same time preserve the unity of design with its construction.

## SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



Nos. 1 and 2. Carved Bosses of Vaults in the Cathedral of Ratisbone and in Basle Minster.

No. 3. Finial from upper part of Doorway of Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris.